



The King's birthday

by Robert Black

THE MUD-SPATTERED jeep, bearing on its front bumper the marking "X-14A", jolted over the worn cobbles of the village street. The laconic G.I. driver nudged the vehicle through the crowds of milling, staring German soldiers in long gray overcoats and wide-eyed Danish villagers with the same unconcern he

would have displayed on the main street of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

It was May 7, 1945—one day before the official end of the war between the Allied powers and the German Reich. Actually, the American lieutenant thought, as he held himself bolt upright beside the driver, I am at war with these Ger-

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By LOUIS PELLETIER, Jr.

mans. His face was gray—with weariness and dried mud—as were his raincoat and helmet. But he sat straight under the silent scrutiny of the Germans. A few of the Danes, greatly daring, raised shouts of welcome. Some made the sign of the “V”.

“So this is Kronwald,” said the lieutenant.

The jeep stopped, against a thicker crowd which completely blocked the narrow street. The driver glanced sidewise at the officer, and spat disgustedly.

“It’s all right, Janowski,” the lieutenant said. He glanced up at the building before which they were stalled, at the faded legend “Forsamlingshus”. “This’ll do us, anyway. Looks like the local version of a city hall.”

He dismounted. The crowds fell away from in front of him as he stepped toward the entrance. The lieutenant thought, I wonder if conquerors always feel this tired when they’ve won, and stepped into the gloom of the entryway.

Inside, there was a long hall with doors along either side. He selected the one inscribed “BORGMESTER” and knocked, still under the curious scrutiny of those of the crowd nearest the entry.

The plain wooden door opened inward and a gaunt, young face appeared around the edge of it. Dark eyes under black, arched brows inspected the American, who shot one look at the disembodied face before walking through the doorway. The

thin, lanky man who belonged to the face shut the door behind him, and eyed him in silence.

“God dag,” said the lieutenant. “You are the Mayor?” He spoke in Danish.

“I am the *borgemester’s* secretary,” said the young man shortly. “Is the American Army then already—?”

“If the American Army isn’t already, it damned soon will be,” said the lieutenant. The young man digested this a moment.

“Whom have I the honor to address?” he said at length.

“You have the honor to address Lieutenant Gunnar Rasmussen, Headquarters, Fourteenth United States Army.”

“You are Danish, then?”

“My father and mother were born in Copenhagen. Mr. Secretary, it is urgent that I get certain information. I was told to come to the *borgmester* of Kronwald. Where is he?”

“He is dead.”

“Dead?” exclaimed Rasmussen harshly. “How . . . ?”

“From natural causes.” At the expression on the American’s face, he smiled faintly. “Oh, you can be quite sure of that, Lieutenant. Yes . . . unfortunately it happened less than two weeks ago . . .”

“Um.” Lieutenant Rasmussen compressed his lips. He glanced uncertainly about the office. “Damn!” he said in English.

“Perhaps I could be of assistance?” The gaunt young man looked sideways at the American. Offhandedly, he added, with apparent irrelevance,

“The King has made his peace.”

The officer shot a sharp look at the secretary. “With the past?” he asked in Danish.

“With the future,” answered the secretary.

They looked at one another. “I am sure I can tell you what you want to know,” said the secretary, smiling.

“Can you take me to Count Victor of Kronwald?” asked the American bluntly.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“The principal reason is that there is no longer a Count Victor.”

“And I suppose *he*, too, died of natural causes?”

The secretary was grim. “No, Lieutenant, the causes were distinctly . . . *unnatural*.”

“The Allied powers are extremely anxious either to find Count Victor—or establish his death and the circumstances surrounding it. You seem to know something about the Count’s passing.” He stopped talking and waited.

“I think,” said the secretary, “it would be best to talk to someone else.”

“What do you mean by ‘someone else’?”

“Someone who can tell you even more than I can about the death of the Count.”

“But—”

“If the Lieutenant will come with me, it will be necessary to proceed to the Castle. If we may use your—I believe it is ‘jeep’?”

KRONWALD Castle stood on one of Denmark’s rare bits of rocky, elevated coastline, a collection of 16th Century towers and fortifications, silver gray in the watery spring sunshine. A stiff breeze whipped in off the steel-blue Baltic. Seabirds wheeled and cried shrilly above the battlements. They were the only sign of life as the jeep, with its three passengers, stopped at the great gateway.

Inside the echoing courtyard the desolation and silence were complete. The secretary walked to a small door set in the base of a huge, round tower and knocked.

For a long time there was no response. The lieutenant shifted impatiently. Suddenly the door creaked and swung open, revealing an old man. He was a tall old man, even with stooping shoulders. White hair and a full white beard framed a face set with startlingly blue eyes.

“Yes?” he said, in a deep, quiet voice, the glinting blue eyes going over them as he waited.

“This is your man, lieutenant,” announced the secretary.

The lieutenant stepped forward, and identified himself again.

“This man,” he said, indicating the secretary, “tells me you can give me news of Count Victor of Kronwald.”

A smile that was like the melting of an iceberg appeared on the wintry old face.

“Will you come in, Lieutenant Rasmussen? His voice was low and

strong, like the drumming of the east wind.

The lieutenant beckoned to Janowski. "Come on, corporal. Get warm." He looked inquiringly at the old man. "What did you say your name was?"

"Call me Peter."

"Peter what?"

"Peter will do. Yes, come. I have a fire in my rooms." They climbed spiral stairs to a low-beamed room where a hearth-fire crackled in a mighty fireplace. "Sit down, gentlemen," said the old man. He sat down, himself, on a rude bench by the fire. Well, well . . . so you want news of Count Victor."

Lieutenant Rasmussen felt the comfort of the seat, felt the warmth of the fire on his chilled hands and in his weary body.

"Very much."

The old man smiled again. "I remember very well," he said. "It was the day the new *gauleiter*, von Reikman, came to see the Countess Elsa. Just two days before the King's birthday.

"He was very correct. All those German swine were at first. Also, he was fat, like a marsh snake in June. He sat down and looked around as though he had just bought Kronwald Castle . . ."

The warmth in the room and the deep, bell-like voice soothed Rasmussen. He was not falling asleep; he was too tired for that. Rather, it was as though old Peter's words came from a sound track of a motion picture. Rasmussen closed his eyes

and the voice stopped.

"Go on," said the American without opening his eyes, "I'm not asleep."

The voice took up its tale again. There were pictures with the sound track now—the reception room of Kronwald, a stone-floored, four hundred-year-old apartment with Victorian furnishings. Rasmussen had seen such rooms in German castles. Herr Gauleiter von Reikman would be sitting in front of the fire in a claw-footed chair, warming his pudgy hands . . .

"A glass of brandy." The Prussian voice belonged with the icy glitter of the monocle screwed into the right eye.

"Yes, Herr von Reikman." That was old Peter's own voice, calm and smooth.

"How soon did the Countess Elsa say she could see me?"

"In just a few minutes, Herr von Reikman." There would be a tinkle of crystal on crystal at this point, a tiny sound of liquid poured.

"You told her it was most urgent?"

"Yes, I told her. She will be with you soon."

"I doubt it." For a fat man's the Gauleiter's voice was rather thinly precise. "In my country we train our women to . . ."

"The brandy, Herr von Reikman."

"Oh, oh, thank you. Ja, in Germany we . . ." A pause, punctuated by an appreciative smacking of lips. "Mmmm . . . *Courvoiser*. Where did you get brandy like this?"

Peter's voice was smooth as ever.

"Count Victor can get many things that are forbidden to his countrymen, Herr von Reikman. Count Victor's cellar is well stocked."

The blond eyebrows ascended. "Is it really . . .?"

"Oh, yes, Herr Gauleiter. For example, we have meat here at the castle. Nobody in Denmark has meat . . . only Kronwald Castle."

The fat man sipped his brandy. "How lucky for you," he said dryly.

"Shall I leave the brandy, sir?"

"Yes. Here—wait a minute. What's your name?"

"Peter, sir."

"Ah, yes—Peter. You've been here since you were a child. Sixty-three years. Correct?"

"Why—yes. How did you . . ."

The Prussian smiled complacently. "It's my business to know many things—Peter." He lost the smile. "You don't approve of Count Victor, do you?"

The old man shrugged. "It's not my place, sir . . ."

There was a small notebook in the German's hand, now. "Three days ago, in the market-place, you were heard to make an indiscreet remark concerning Count Victor's collaboration with . . . Berlin. I think a word very close to 'traitor' was used?"

"Was it, sir?" The deep old voice was mild.

"What do you think?" The Prussian jaw suddenly jutted as the Gauleiter leaned forward, his eyes boring.

"I think, Herr von Reikman, the

fire needs more wood. If you excuse me, I will get some."

The Nazi sank back. "Do so, by all means. And Peter . . ."

The old servant turned. "Yes sir?"

"Tell your mistress I do not intend to spend all afternoon here. My business is urgent, and——"

"Suppose you tell her yourself—sir."

A wave of one blue-veined hand indicated the doorway. The Gauleiter looked, and stood up.

The tall girl who stood in the curtained archway smiled faintly as she stepped onto the fine, dark-red rug. She was delicately formed, with long, slim hands and feet. Honey-colored hair was piled atop her head. Countess Elsa was beautiful. She inclined her head slightly.

"Herr von Reikman," she said.

"Countess Elsa, excuse me, I was just saying . . ."

"That's quite all right, Herr von Reikman. Sit down, please." She waved a hand, as she seated herself. "By your own statement, your business is urgent. Pray let us hear what it is."

"Yes—we come to that. Er—do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you." The Gauleiter clipped a cigar with a jewelled cigar-cutter . . . "A good cigar always makes unpleasant things easier to tell."

"You sound almost as if you had rehearsed that line on the way to the castle, Herr von Reikman."

He was bland, now. "I did. And since it missed fire, I'll be blunt, Countess."

"I prefer it."

"Three days ago, Countess—to be exact, the day I arrived to take up my duties as *gauleiter* of this district—I found this note on my desk. If you will read it?" He handed her a square sheet of note-paper.

She eyed it without interest. "Count Victor of Kronwald will kill himself on the night of the King's Birthday," she read. She looked questioningly at him.

He puffed at his cigar. "That was in the morning. At noon, I found this one." He read it himself: "Count Victor of Kronwald will repudiate his Nazi collaborators. He will choose the night of the King's birthday for his death."

The Countess' eyebrows were raised politely. The Nazi put the notes away.

"At first," he said, "I thought it was some crank. But the notes kept coming. Then I heard that everybody in the district knew about the notes and what they said." He laughed, a little too carelessly. "In every house and shop and farm they are saying that Count Victor is going to kill himself."

"That is what they are saying?"

"It's not that I have the slightest fear for the Count's safety," von Reikman added hurriedly, "but the writer of these notes must be found—" his voice rose a little "—found, and treated to the severest penalties!"

"You have no fear for my hus-

band's safety?"

The *gauleiter* glanced sharply at her, but her tone was very cool. She was looking into the dancing flames in the cavernous blackened fireplace.

"Of course not," he said sharply. "Certainly no anonymous letter-writer could force the Count to take his own life."

"I wonder."

"What do you mean, you wonder?"

"Well—you know that my husband is hated by the whole countryside—by the whole Danish nation, for that matter?"

"What of it? The people are stupid."

"Perhaps. The writer of these notes—not so stupid."

"You think not?"

"If you knew Danish history, Herr von Reikman, you might agree he is not. For hundreds of years, here at Kronwald, the night of the King's birthday has been a special occasion. On that night, for centuries, the castle has renewed its pledge of loyalty to the King and to Denmark's freedom."

"Mmm . . ." The German smiled. "Quite a theatrical gesture."

"Isn't it? Now, what I am thinking is that if someone were to remind the Count—"

"That his allegiance is now to our glorious Fuehrer . . . ?"

"That is what I meant. If, with his loyalty to the Fuehrer in mind, the Count should feel inclined to substitute *his* name for the King's in

his annual pledge of allegiance, the night of the King's birthday would be an incomparably effective moment for it. Such a dramatic gesture of disloyalty would be of great aid to the German Reich, is it not so?"

Von Reikman nodded. "Yes, Countess."

"Whereas, if Count Victor were to commit suicide on the night of the King's birthday, the whole nation would read into his act repudiation of his present association with your countrymen, Herr von Reikman."

Herr von Reikman smiled sweetly. "Your grasp of the issues is masterly, Countess. And, since you so well appreciate the significance of these anonymous notes, you will understand why I am going to have to take certain liberties to track down the writer."

"Liberties . . . ?" She spoke it on a rising note.

"Yes." He stood up. "That is why, Countess, I anticipate your permission to speak with a man I happen to know is here on your estate."

"And that would be . . . ?"

"Dr. Ericsson, Countess. Where is he?"

THE WHITE mice squeaked and darted in the chambers of the tiny maze. Their pink noses and white whiskers quivered with indecision. Dr. Ericsson tapped with a finger-nail on the glass, apparently oblivious to von Reikman's entrance. Old Peter had closed the door and vanished.

"Dr. Ericsson?"

The man beside the table looked up. He was a big man, graying and shaggy, in loose, comfortable clothes. He had the direct, untrammelled gaze of the scientist and the slim hands of a musician.

"Sit down, Herr von Reikman. Don't be alarmed by these mice. I'll remove them just as soon as Herman gets through the maze. He is my backward pupil, is Herman. But I've been trying him on liver extract . . ."

There was a burst of squeaking. A fat mouse darted through a passage in the maze. Dr. Ericsson clapped his hands. "Good, Herman! And now, good night!" He sat the box of mice on a shelf. "Well, Herr von Reikman, I've been expecting you. Please sit down. Am I right to assume you've come to see me about the notes?"

"You're a psychiatrist, aren't you, Doctor?"

"I am, sir."

"An authority, I believe, on techniques of mass suggestion . . . ?"

The big man shrugged massive shoulders. "My monograph on the subject published just before the war, had a gratifying reception," he admitted. "Once again, Herr von Reikman—it is about the notes?"

The *gauleiter* smiled. "Correct, Doctor."

Ericsson nodded. "When I first heard about them, I said to myself 'The new *gauleiter* will want my theory concerning the type of mind which would be prompted to write

such notes.' I'll tell you my theory, Herr—"

"I don't want your theory, Doctor." The German's voice was cold. "I want you to answer some questions."

Ericsson took a moment, answering. "So it's like that," he remarked. "Perhaps you'd like a specimen of my handwriting, too?"

"I'm not a fool, Doctor."

"That's very possible." Ericsson was bland.

Von Reikman ignored the *double entendre*. "How long, Doctor, have you been treating Count Victor for a certain nervous disorder?"

"Five years."

"What would you say his condition is, now?"

Ericsson countered with a question of his own. "You've never met Count Victor, have you, Herr von Reikman?"

"Never."

"When you talk with him, you'll see no outward sign of his malady. It manifests itself during periods of despondency. Recently, those periods have been few."

"Count Victor depends a good deal on you, eh, Doctor?"

"I suppose so. I've almost cured him. In return, he allows me this laboratory, and money for my experiments."

Von Reikman persisted. "But you *do* have great influence over his mental processes?"

Ericsson spread his hands. "Yes, Herr Gauleiter—I do. In fact, if I had decided to—liquidate, shall we say—Count Victor, I would have

written the notes exactly as people say they are written. The Count would be highly susceptible to such a mental attack. Is that what you wanted me to say?"

"Yes." The Prussian smiled quietly. His eyes took in the laboratory, the racks of tubes and retorts, the sink, the boxes of mice. From them came muffled squeaks and scurrings. A sharp rodent smell made the room close for breathing.

The *gauleiter* came back to the present. "Almost. One question more, Doctor. Count Victor had a brother, who left Kronwald when our troops occupied your country. That brother, Christian, is now known to be working with the Danish underground, which in turn is collaborating with the British military intelligence. I believe this Christian was one of your students at the University?"

"He was one of my most brilliant students."

"And understands your techniques thoroughly?"

Ericsson spread his hands. "I would say, yes."

"Do you know his whereabouts now?"

Ericsson chuckled, the laugh of a big man who is enjoying a joke. "No, I don't. Nor does your Gestapo. And that, Herr Gauleiter, is the one thing we have in common."

Von Reikman thinned his heavy lips. "You're a very outspoken man, Doctor."

"I find it the best form of deception."

"Do you think it wise to try to deceive the lawful government of your country?"

"Lawful government . . . ?" Ericsson drew out the words comically. He chuckled again. The German flushed.

"You may not find all this as funny as you seem to find it now, if Count Victor removes his protection from you, Dr. Ericsson."

"He won't."

"How sure you are of that, Doctor . . ."

"Of course. Inform him of his impending 'suicide', as you naturally will, and you'll see that he needs me more than ever. You do intend to show the notes to the Count?"

"Yes. I shall be informed as soon as His Excellency returns tonight from Berlin, and will present myself to him."

"His reaction should be interesting," said Ericsson musingly. "Would it inconvenience you if I were present when the Count returns, tonight?"

The Gauleiter picked up his gloves, and began fastening his military overcoat.

"Not at all, Doctor. I'd be delighted." He paused, and spoke again, more slowly. "Your own reactions should be most interesting, too, Doctor."

AN HOUR after dinner, Old Peter found the Countess Elsa in the music room, at her piano. The strange, sweet dissonances of a De-

bussy nocturne flowed peacefully from beneath her white fingers.

"Countess . . . your pardon . . ."

The piano fell silent. "Yes, Peter?"

"Count Victor asks that you and Dr. Ericsson come into the library now, Countess."

"Thank you, Peter."

The psychiatrist arose from a chair in the shadows.

"Ready, Elsa?"

The girl sat at the keyboard. "In just a moment, Kurt."

"This is going to be difficult for you."

"Very." She struck a harsh, crashing chord from the instrument. "Kurt . . ."

"Yes, Elsa . . . ?"

"How must I think? How must I discipline my mind?" Half clenched, her hands lifted from the keys. "In thinking of Victor, I mean . . . ?"

His voice was calm. "Think of him as he once was—before this disease of fascism infected him. This man is not Victor. He is dead, Elsa—dead."

"Sometimes I feel I, too, am dead." She stood up. "Take me into the library, Kurt."

As they opened the door and paused on the threshold, the first words from inside were like a grotesque echo of their own conversation . . .

"Dead! So that's what the people think, eh? They think to kill me with words, do they? They can't do *that* to me, Herr von Reikman.

"They can't, they can't . . ."

"Count Victor . . ." Ericsson's quiet tones dominated the room. "You will not excite yourself. It is bad for you."

"Victor, please . . ." The Countess stood by the heavy, dark wood table, near the swollen, uniformed figure of von Reikman. The new *gauleiter* was smiling.

The slender, dark-haired man in the uniform of the Royal Household Guards, sprawling in a deep chair by the fire, laughed too loudly and tapped a sheet of note paper with his fingers. "Look at this childish note. Count Victor will kill himself on the night of the King's birthday. Because of his great shame, he . . ." He broke off. "I'll 'shame' them, all right! By heaven, I'll . . . I'll . . ." He broke off, coughing violently, doubled over.

"Doctor," he said, after a moment, in a spent voice, "a little of the brandy, please."

Ericsson was already pouring a small glassful. "Here, Count Victor. Now, you must not upset yourself . . ."

The Count spoke on the heels of the gulped brandy. "Upset? Who's upset. The thing is nonsensical, fantastic. Completely!"

"Of course, of course." Ericsson spoke soothingly. "You haven't a thing to worry about. Ask Herr von Reikman. His police are almost on the point of catching the author of these notes."

The slight, lean figure of the Count bounded to its feet. The

Count strode over to von Reikman's chair.

"Is this true, von Reikman? In Berlin, they told me that you would protect me."

The German waved his cigar. "I expect an arrest within a matter of hours. And besides, as you said yourself, Count, what have you to fear from these stupid notes?"

"Yes, of course . . . of course." The Count sank into his chair again. "Doctor," he said, hoarsely, "I need a sedative tonight . . ."

"Certainly, Victor."

"I'll show them, by God! I'll give a dinner here, the night of the King's birthday! The whole countryside'll know about it. So I'm about to kill myself, eh? We'll see! I'll give a dinner. You'll be my guest, von Reikman?"

"With pleasure, Count."

The Count laughed, looking around at the three others in the room. "Elsa, you'll wear that gown you wore at the royal ball in Copenhagen! You still have it?"

"Yes, Victor."

"Good, good! And your jewels. You understand, you'll wear all your jewels, Elsa. Oh, we'll celebrate the King's birthday properly, I tell you! I'll light up the castle like a Yule-tree. We'll see who's afraid! Kill me with words, eh?"

"Count Victor!" Ericsson spoke sharply.

The Count waved his arms wildly. "If it's words they're after, I'll give 'em words!" Herr von Reikman—on the night of the King's birth-

day, I shall want to make a statement for the newspapers. You know of our custom—each year we swear allegiance to the King. Well!" He laughed loudly. "This year I think my statement of allegiance will be a bit—edited, hm? Good, eh, von Reikman?"

"Very good, Count." The *gauleiter's* smile was broad.

"Victor, you're getting excited." It was the Countess. She came to his side. "Dr. Ericsson . . . tell him he's—"

"You're right, Elsa." The Count sank back. "Sometimes the strain of my work is too much. Doctor . . . you'll . . . you'll talk to me for awhile before I go to bed . . . won't you?"

"Of course."

"Talk to you?" Von Reikman was no longer smiling.

"Yes . . . the Doctor has a way of calming my nerves. It's slightly . . . hypnotic. Right, Doctor?" His voice was calmer, now.

"You might call it that, Victor."

"Count Victor, I'd strongly advise . . ." The *Gauleiter* was not pleased.

"No, no. It's the only thing that helps me. I just go quietly to sleep, while the Doctor talks." His voice was that of a dreaming child.

"But, Count . . ."

"Good night, Herr von Reikman." There was dismissal in the Count's tone. "I'll expect you for dinner, the night of the King's birthday . . ."

"Of course, Count." The Nazi official withdrew, eyeing Ericsson blackly. As he closed the door, he

heard the Count's voice, trailing away.

"They *can't* hurt me with words, can they . . .? Not with words, mere words . . ."

THERE WAS another note. It had been found pinned to the door of Herr von Reikman's own house in the town. He arrived at his office flustered and angry—to find another note, lying on the seat of his desk chair.

He rang furiously for the captain in charge of the local SS detachment.

"*Hauptmann!* These stupid things are silly on their face, but there may be a more sinister motive behind them. It is quite possible an attempt will be made on Count Victor's life—and then, the report will be circulated it was suicide!" He paused. "There will be four of us at dinner, tomorrow night. Have fifty guards patrol the grounds."

"Ja, Herr von Reikman!"

"Station four guards in the dining room where we will be eating. Let no one get near Count Victor."

"Ja, Herr von Reikman!"

"That's all, *Hauptmann.*"

After the captain was gone, he mused. "Such resistance as these fools make to our New Order! Will they never learn—never give up? The British, the Americans—much good *they'll* be to them. Oh, well . . . it is necessary they be taught."

WAIT A minute, you!" Old Peter paused, with his

tray, at the Gestapo plainclothesman's voice.

"What did you say, sir?"

"You heard me. I said, taste that wine. Go on, let me see you do it."

"Oh. Taste it. Why, of course."

The tall old man poured sparkling wine into a thin crystal glass, tilted it down his throat. "It's very good, sir. Do you doubt its quality . . . ?"

Don't be insolent, *Danischer schwein!* All right, you can take it in."

"Thank you, sir." The old servant went on into the dining room.

Lights blazed, glinting from chandelier pendants, from glassware, from silver, from the magnificent jewels on the Countess Elsa's neck and arms, from the monocle of Herr Gauleiter von Reikman. They gleamed from the pince-nez of Dr. Ericsson and from the shining accoutrements of four gray-uniformed soldiers, one of whom wore a corporal's chevrons.

"Ah, Peter!" The Count half-rose as Peter approached with the wine. Count Victor's face was flushed. He seized the decanter before Peter could set down the tray.

"Good boy, Peter! Set it down." He flourished the decanter. "We'll drink another toast to the King!"

"Victor, I think we've drunk enough toasts." The Countess strove to keep her voice pleasant.

"Nonsense!" He dumped rosy wine into his glass. "It's the King's birthday, isn't it? Ladies and gentlemen—charge your glasses . . ."

"Oh . . . Peter . . ." It was

Ericsson, speaking casually.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did they make you taste that wine before you brought it in?"

"Yes, Doctor, they did."

"What's this? What's this about tasting wine?" The Count was scowling.

"A simple precaution of my own," said von Reikman hastily. "I hope you don't mind . . ."

"Mind?" The Count suddenly sat down, his voice low. "I don't mind. You don't think . . . ?"

"Now, Victor, don't get upset," said the Countess hurriedly.

"Elsa!" He half-shouted it. "For the love of heaven, Elsa, will you stop repeating that inane phrase? All through dinner—'Victor, don't get upset, Victor don't upset yourself.' He mimicked her in thin, womanish tones. "I'm *not* upset. What have I got to be upset about? *You're* more upset than I am."

Ericsson laughed lightly. "I think I can understand the Countess' feelings. This is the first dinner I've ever eaten with four soldiers over-seeing every bite I take. Don't you think, Herr Reikman . . ."

"I must insist, Doctor, that the soldiers remain." Von Reikman was not smiling.

"Well, at least," said Ericsson "ask them to sit down!"

"Gefreiter!"

"Ja, Herr Gauleiter!" The corporal's heels cracked to attention.

"Your men may be seated."

"Jawohl, Herr Gauleiter. Thank you, Herr Gauleiter!"

Amid a subdued tinkle of accoutrements, the soldiers sat down.

"Peter!" said the Count. "Bring wine for the soldiers."

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone will have more wine!"

The Count's voice was suddenly loud and very bright. "We're going to toast the King. What time is it, Doctor?"

Three pairs of eyes turned on Ericsson as he pulled a heavy gold hunting-case watch from his pocket, unsnapped the case.

"Five minutes to twelve, Count Victor."

"Ha, ha, ha!" The Count threw himself back in his chair, mouth wide open, laughing. "Five to twelve, and I'm still alive! Bring the wine, Peter!"

"Yes, sir."

"You know," said the Count confidently, after the old man had gone, "Peter tells me everything they say down at the village. The people say that I have just five minutes to live."

"So . . . Peter tells you the village gossip?" asked von Reikman.

"Oh, yes . . . Peter discovered several of the notes and brought them to me."

"He brought you the notes?" Von Reikman eyed the corporal.

"Oh, yes. The last one said . . . Now, what *did* it say?"

"Victor, can't we talk about something else?" The Countess' voice was near the breaking-point.

"Why? It's a fascinating subject. Ask the Doctor. He and I have discussed it for hours. He told me

about some West Indian cult which disposes of an enemy simply by writing his name on a slip of paper and sending it to him. We decided that perhaps the same thing is being tried on me."

"Dr. Ericsson!" exploded von Reikman. "In view of the Count's nervous condition, don't you think that . . ."

"My private life is *my* affair, Herr von Reikman." The Count glared at the German with a drunken man's owlish anger.

"When you work for the Reich, Count Victor," retorted the Nazi coldly, "you *have* no private life. I repeat, Doctor——"

"As the Count's personal physician," said Ericsson stiffly, "I prescribe my own remedies. One way to guard against occult practices is to know the truth about them."

"But," grated the German, exasperated, "surely you don't believe——"

"In Haiti, Herr von Reikman, I saw a man die after receiving a paper with his name on it. I don't explain it. I simply recite a fact."

"Ho, ho!" The Count's laughter had a slightly hysterical overtone. "You see—I *could* be killed with pen and ink! In exactly three minutes—if my watch is right. Peter! Peter! Where the devil is the old fool with the wine?"

"Victor, if you will excuse me, I have a headache." Countess Elsa stood up in her place at the table.

"You will stay here, Elsa!" He set down his glass and stared at

her, swaying slightly. "No one leaves this room until after midnight. *Sit down, Elsa . . . !*"

The Countess sat down.

"Gefreiter!"

"Ja, Herr Gauleiter!"

"Lock the door. Bolt all the windows." Herr von Reikman drew a handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed delicately at his brow. His lips stretched themselves into a wide smile. The smile collapsed as suddenly as it had appeared.

"*Jawohl, Herr Gauleiter!*"

"That's right!" The Count sloshed wine into his glass. "Bolt everything! By God, they won't come in *here*. They'll never touch *me!*"

He drank off the wine, and looked pitifully at Ericsson. The doctor sat stiffly in his chair. His fingers worked gently on the stem of a wineglass, turning it softly round and round on the white damask cloth.

Countess Elsa huddled in her chair. She seemed afraid to move, hardly to breathe.

"Elsa! Another drink!"

"Oh, Victor. Please . . ."

"Countess," said Ericsson tonelessly, "perhaps it would be better to comply with his wishes . . ."

"That's right! Humor me, my dear! You'll never forgive yourself if you treat me unkindly during the *last two minutes of my life!* Especially—" his voice was suddenly vicious "—especially since you wished me dead so many times!"

"Victor!"

"It's the truth, isn't it?" He pressed her, leaning far over the table, goggling at her, lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl.

"Count Victor . . ." began Ericsson.

"Two minutes to live! This is a very good time, Doctor, to hear my wife's confession! Well, Elsa?"

"It is true." She spoke slowly and evenly, without emotion in her level voice. "Yes, Victor, I wish you were dead. I have wished it often. I hate to live beneath the same roof with you, with what you've become—a Nazi puppet. I hate your sniveling, goose-stepping little mind, just as I loathe this fat specimen of the super-race you've invited to dinner."

"Gefreiter!" bleated von Reikman, "arrest that woman!"

"Let her finish." Count Victor's voice was, astonishingly, quite cool. "Sit down, corporal. Continue, Elsa."

"I despise you. Your countrymen despise you. You sold your honor, the honor of your house, all that Kronwald has stood for throughout the centuries, for a cast iron Nazi cross."

She ended on a strangled sob. In the silence, a clock struck, and almost on the same note, from the principal tower of the castle, above in the black, windy night, boomed the heavy tone of the great bell of Kronwald.

It was midnight.

"May God grant wisdom to our King and freedom to our people." Ericsson spoke softly.

The great bell boomed again.

"May Kronwald always keep the faith," answered the Countess Elsa.

There was a tiny click, and the room sank into blackness. There was a split second of utter silence and darkness.

Then the bell's boom and von Reikman's scream came together.

"Gefreiter . . . ! The door's opening, stop them, stop them, do you hear . . . ?"

"Nein, Herr Gauleiter . . ." The soldier's voice was shaken but clear, in the blackness. "It is not opening. My hand is on the knob."

As he spoke, the sound of hinges, creaking faintly, was sharply audible.

"Count Victor!"

The voice came from no one spot, it was all around them, it was among them, deep-toned, solemn as the booming bell in the night above.

"Yes . . . ?" The Count's voice was answering. It was calm, unhurried.

"Gefreiter! I order you . . ."

"Count Victor of Kronwald."

The slow, awful tones echoed as in a great room.

"I hear you." The Count's level, calm response came unhesitatingly.

"*Who is speaking?*" The gaul-eiter's voice had tears in it.

"Count Victor knows who speaks." The deep, inexorable tones were in the room with them. "Victor, this is your time. Are you ready?"

"I am ready."

"Now you die like a soldier, Victor, but your name will live on."

"Victor!" Countess Elsa's scream

ripped the intolerable tension like a shot. "Don't do it, Victor! Oh, don't do it . . . !"

"Goodbye, Elsa."

The Count's voice sounded as if from a distance, growing smaller, receding.

"Victor . . . !"

The smashing of glass overrode her scream, a crash as of a hundred breaking windows.

"Count Victo-o-or . . ."

The voice died away in a long lament, sad, lonely, lost on the night wind.

Through the broken windows, borne on the damp, eastering gale, came the thunder of the Baltic rollers dashing against the rocks at the foot of Kronwald Castle.

THE OLD man's voice ceased. From below the windows came the muffled roar of the surf. On the hearth in the massive fireplace, the embers glowed dully. Outside small-paned windows the afternoon light waned.

Old Peter spoke again. "Well—that is how it was at Kronwald on the night of the King's birthday. It was a telling stroke. The whole nation knew that Count Victor had repudiated his Nazi collaborators, had atoned for his treason to King and country by taking his own life."

Rasmussen got to his feet.

"Now," he said, "tell me what really happened."

He could have been speaking to the thin, intense young secretary,

who still sat, alert and watchful, beside the American. It was the old man, however, who answered.

"Why, the Count's body was never found. In the village they said it had been washed out to sea. On the rocks below the room where the birthday dinner was held, they found the Count's handkerchief with the red initial 'V', faded by a night of salt spray."

Rasmussen's eyes bored at the old man, and Peter grinned back at him.

"No," he said, "I didn't kill him. Count Victor of Kronwald was shot through the head by his own brother, Christian, the night he arrived home unexpectedly from Berlin, six days before the King's birthday. Christian was here. He was in the underground. So were we all—the Countess, Dr. Ericsson, myself. When the Count came back, Christian decided to try to reason with him. It was a foolish hope. They quarreled, and—well, Christian eliminated one of the slimiest traitors in Denmark's history. It was then that the Doctor got the idea for the notes."

"With Christian, I suppose, playing his own brother for the new *gauleiter*?"

"Of course. The whole plan was the Doctor's. A few minutes before midnight, I was sent for more wine. On the stroke of twelve, I cut the lights in the castle, from a special switch installed for the purpose. Von Reikman's men were watching the regular master-switch, naturally."

"And then?"

"Well — our fireplaces here at

Kronwald are quite large. This is a very old building. The oldest parts date from the Fifteenth Century; most of the Kronwald you see, however, was constructed in the Seventeenth Century by Count Victor's ancestor, Count Christian the Pious." He shrugged. "That was during the Thirty Years War, a troubled time, in which a wise man was careful to have more than one way by which to leave his house. And in those days, many a man left his house by way of the fireplace."

"I see. So you threw the switch, went through some kind of passageway in the walls, opening into the fireplace, and —"

"Count Victor . . ." The sepulchral tones of the old man's voice boomed fearsomely even in the warm, quiet room.

Rasmussen grinned faintly. "I see," he said again. "Just how did you dispose of Christian, to prevent von Reikman's boys from getting onto the impersonation?"

The borgmaster's secretary chuckled thinly. "Simple. I simply slipped into the fireplace, too."

Rasmussen swung around facing him. "You . . . you're Christian?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Rasmussen." The secretary's smile was as thin as his chuckle. "Yes, I shot my brother." "But — von Reikman — ?"

"Von Reikman was relieved of his post following the 'suicide' of Count Victor," said the secretary — or Christian — dryly. "The Nazis did not forgive those who failed them. I carried on my work for the under-

ground from the Mayor's office. Oh, yes — " he waved a hand — everyone in the village knew who I was — everyone, except the new *gauleiter* — and no one told. The new *gauleiter*," he added, musingly, "seems to have disappeared within the past week."

"Countess Elsa and the Doctor?"

"They escaped together to Sweden. At least, I was told that they crossed

the Skaggerak safely."

"Well — " Rasmussen reached for his muddy raincoat. "I guess I can write a report. No one's going to believe it, of course."

"I wonder," said Christian "how much of what has happened in Europe in the last five years will be believed by the end of the next five years?"

Newest regular voice on "Suspense" is that of Actor Hans Conreid, recently discharged by the Army after 27 months' service. His first job on getting back into "civvies," incidentally, was to co-star on radio's outstanding theater of thrills with Rita Hayworth in "Three Times Murder." Just before release, Conreid was program director for WVTR, Army station in Tokio.
